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*Our Lady,
Model of Faith*

JEAN GALOT, S.J.

Number 49

ABOUT THE AUTHOR . . .

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OUR LADY, MODEL OF FAITH

JEAN GALOT, S.J.

When we think of Mary's greatness, and her happy destiny, we sum them up in her quality of Mother of God. But although it is true that this title is her glory, the Gospel also shows us how it is rooted in faith. When she met the young girl of Nazareth, Elizabeth discovered by the leaping of the babe in her womb, that she was welcoming the bearer of messianic salvation, the mother of the Messiah. "How have I deserved to be thus visited by the mother of my Lord?" Yet she does not proclaim Mary to be blessed because of this maternity, but for the faith which presided at it: "Blessed is she who has believed." (Luke 1:45) The unfortunate example of Zachary bears witness by contrast to the excellence of Mary's faith; while Elizabeth's husband showed his skepticism at the promise of a miracle, the Blessed Virgin did not hesitate an instant in believing a still more extraordinary announcement; she did not demand a sign, she had no doubt; she simply asked what kind of service God required of her and how she could have a son while remaining a virgin: "How can that be?" She had immediately believed that it would be done, and it was in full faith that she gave her consent and became the mother of the Savior. That was what Elizabeth found out when she heard Mary's joyful salutation, and what she must have compared to her husband's silence. It was, so to speak, Faith in person who entered her house over which shadow of unbelief still hovered. It is a picture of the role of Our Lady's faith, victoriously entering into the domains of unbelief.

MARY, MODEL OF GROWTH IN FAITH

Elizabeth's intuition is confirmed by the declaration of Christ Himself. Jesus replied to the woman who proclaimed the blessedness of her who had been the mother of such a Son, by indicating the profound source of this blessedness. He does not deny that "blessed is the womb that bore him," but He adds to it, "Rather, blessed are they who hear the word of God and keep it." (Luke 11:28) Having heard the word of God, especially that which was

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pronounced by the Angel at the Annunciation, and having received it in a perfect manner, that is to say, with a pure faith, is the first of Mary's blessings. From that faith sprang her own divine maternity; in Our Lady, faith and maternity are indissolubly united, for she was to be the mother of the Redeemer, destined to collaborate with her whole maternal being in the Redemption. In a maternity which was a cooperation in the work of salvation, it can be understood that faith had to play a primary part. In order to be truly and completely the mother of the Redeemer, Mary first had to believe.

To Jesus, looking at the crowd and seeing those who were beginning to believe and those who were refusing to hear His message, Our Lady appeared at the head, far ahead of those who were listening to the word of God. She had believed in Him before He had even been conceived. Not only had she listened to the divine word, but she had kept it. She had kept the message of the Annunciation in her heart, and while meditating on what had been said to her of this "Son of God" Who had been given to her, she never ceased to increase her faith. It would be a mistake to think that Mary's faith was conferred upon her as something ready-made and immutable; with her it was a constantly progressing activity, a never ceasing growth. At the beginning, in her youth, Mary had learned the messianic promises and believed them with the whole force of her faith in God. The Angel Gabriel's announcement transformed her faith by presenting her with the Messiah in person.

But adherence to the angel's words was not the end; henceforth Our Lady was to find their truth incarnated in her Child and to add to her maternal affection and admiration an assent to a more and more confident and lucid faith. Let us note that the task was not so easy as popular opinion has imagined it to be. The angel had proclaimed the extraordinary personality and destiny of Jesus, but the Child seemed so like others (differing only because of the absence of sin) and His development seemed to come about in such an ordinary way, in such banal circumstances, that it seemed daring to recognize in Him the king of messianic times and the liberator of the world. During the thirty years at Nazareth, the message of the Annunciation remained deeply hidden in the secrecy of Jesus' soul,

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and it needed the exceptional strength of Mary's faith to discover it there and to perceive ever more clearly the Redeemer in her Son. What the mother's eyes discerned more and more in the gaze of the child and young man, apparently so normal, was the mystery of His divine filiation behind the banality of daily life and behind the intimacy of family relations; it was the divine greatness that Our Lady willed to reach, towards which she tended more and more ardently and to which her faith surrendered itself.

Her example teaches us therefore that Christian faith should be a constantly developing activity, always growing more lucid and more ardent, and that it would be illusion to consider it as something acquired once and for all and to imagine that it would be enough to let it lie fallow and immutable. The growth of Mary's faith is a picture of the development of the faith of the whole Church. The Church has to keep the divine message in her heart, not only in order to preserve it, but to delve into it and continually to bring forth from it new depths, making more explicit all the aspects of truth. The same holds good for the faith of each individual Christian who has received the faith of baptism to enable him to bear all its fruits, and who should work continually to assimilate better the doctrine of his **Credo**, to realize it more intimately, and to adhere to it with more personal conviction.

More than this, Our Lady's example shows us how this progress ought to be carried out. Mary had first adhered to the divine word transmitted by the angel, then she directed this adherence more and more concretely to Jesus Himself, in Whom by an increasingly intimate contact she was discovering the glory of this word and its perfect verification. So the Church appropriates to herself more completely the truth put into her hands, not by a simple intellectual progress, but by an increasingly profound insertion in Christ, in Whom she recognizes by a keener insight the center of all doctrine and the epitome of mystery. In the history of the development of dogma, there is a centrifugal movement demonstrated by the setting out of certain sections of the message which had hitherto been little known and developed (of which we have had recent examples in Marian theology) but this primary movement is reabsorbed finally in an-

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other, a centripetal one, which illuminates ever more forcefully the convergence of the whole doctrine on the person of Christ. It is in this way that during the last twenty years the development of the theory of the Mystical Body has manifested more clearly the vivifying presence of Christ in His Church, and one cannot doubt that the contemporary effort at comprehension of Marian coredemption, far from doing harm to the redemptive role of Jesus, will end by setting it more in relief and by showing how everything, even the mediation of Our Lady, refers to Him. This progressive concentration of the comprehension of the faith on Christ accompanies the continual deepening of life in Him, so that there is agreement between the orientations of theology and aspirations of a devotion which is turning more towards the person of the Savior. This law of the growth of faith in the Church was first lived by Mary.

It is destined to be verified in each of us; we believe in a certain number of truths, but the important thing is to adhere to them in Christ's person and to find again in Him by intimate contact what we first discovered in the enunciation of Christian doctrine. If Our Lady, who received exceptional privileges and the perfection of sanctity, had to deepen her faith each day by a closer union of thought and feeling with her Son, is there not in that an indication that this work of deepening is part of the individual's religious destiny and is incumbent on each one of us? Like Mary who, in the obscurity of the hidden life of Jesus, discovered and rediscovered a higher light, we have to penetrate always further by our faith into the hidden life of Christ in us. We cannot rest content with the abstract dogma, but must realize it in a concrete manner in intimacy with the Saviour, so that our faith may be enriched by a closer and sweeter knowledge; like Our Lady at Nazareth, it is for us to understand, in the sight of Jesus, how He is Son of God and bears our salvation with Him.

MARY, MODEL OF FAITH AT CANA

The Gospel permits us to measure the result of the long period of the deepening of Mary's faith. At the beginning of the public life, the episode of the marriage in Cana shows us a surprising

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attitude of faith in her. She addresses herself to Jesus in order to supply the lack of wine and to assist the poverty of the newly-weds. By her observation, "They have no wine" (John 2:3), she knows that she is practically asking for a miracle. Who has told her that Christ had the power of performing miracles? She has never seen Him do so, for He has not done one before. It is because she is the first of "those who have not seen, and yet have believed." (John 20:29) Later on, the Saviour will do many miracles and it will be easier to believe in His miraculous power, though some will still not have the strength or the good will. But Mary believed in this power before it was manifested. Although Jesus had not accomplished any wonders during the life at Nazareth, His mother had faith in His omnipotence and knew that she could ask Him to intervene. Before the disciples' faith was born, that of Our Lady had come to maturity and showed a remarkable vigor.

APOSTOLIC ROLE OF FAITH

The faith at Cana, the model for all time, is rich in lessons. First of all, it witnesses to the importance which God attaches to faith in the work of salvation.

Before the Incarnation, He had asked for Mary's act of faith. And before manifesting for the first time to the world Jesus' saving mission by the performing of a miracle, He inspired an act of faith on the part of Our Lady, and He saw such value in it that that faith determined the hour for the public revelation of the Messiah. God, Who in His omnipotence could act alone, actually requires the collaboration of faith before executing His plans; what He asked of Mary, He later asks of us, and He only causes the expansion of the kingdom of Christ in proportion to the help which we give by our faith. It is the actual faith of Christians which sets the pace for the diffusion of the Gospel among unbelievers. Belief is not simply a personal duty, but an essentially apostolic task. So we see in the Gospel that Mary's faith is at the origin of that of the disciples, for the story of the miracle ends with these words, eloquent in their simplicity, "And His disciples believed in Him." (John 2:11) This new faith is a more substantial marvel than the transformation of

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water into wine and constitutes the most remarkable consequence of the faith of Our Lady, who thus appears as presiding over that of the Church.

ESSENTIALLY SUPERNATURAL CHARACTER OF FAITH

Moreover, the faith of Cana is faith in miracles.

We run the risk of losing sight of this magnificent boldness of faith, which refuses to consider the natural order of things as the prescribed limit which cannot be surpassed, and which, on the contrary, appeals to a superior order which dominates and envelops nature. To have faith is to believe in the impossible, for it is the humanly impossible thing that God has decided to do, and the whole undertaking of salvation absolutely transcends the powers of man and the natural laws. The miracle is the expression of this transcendence, this surpassing of nature by divine action. If a witness at Cana could have guessed the meaning of Mary's prayer, and realized that to obtain it involved a miracle, would he not, quite naturally, have shrugged his shoulders before such a claim? Would he not have advised a sensible resignation in the embarrassing situation which could not be altered? It is precisely this fatalism faith will not admit, for it relies on a power surpassing human limits. In practice, for the Christian, faith means that before the spectacle of a world on which the fatalism of sin seems to weigh, he does not accept its law and places his trust on the marvels and miracles of grace.

This faith in miracles is, however, always faith in Christ.

What Mary did in essence at Cana was to show absolute confidence in Jesus' person, in Whom she recognized a sovereign power. The whole Christian Faith rests on this fundamental confidence in Christ; it is much more than an intellectual attitude; it is truly an abandonment of the whole being to a person from Whom one expects everything. How many times in the Gospel do we not see Christ moved by so many strangers who manifest this personal confidence by calling upon His help. He wonders at this faith and rewards it amply. Our Lady's was not the trust of a day, but the fruit of a confidence which was, so to speak, identified with her

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life, which had taken hold of her whole being and orientated it towards the Lord; she lived for Him.

THE TRIUMPHANT CHARACTER OF FAITH

Finally, the faith at Cana is an example of perseverance.

Jesus did not at once consent to His mother's request, and proved her faith by making an objection, declaring that Mary was interfering in a domain which was not hers and that the hour for the first miracle had not yet arrived. In no way disconcerted, Our Lady simply told the servants to obey her Son and do what He would tell them. She persisted in her faith, and Christ justified this persistence; He advanced His hour by performing a miracle. We have here to note a feature of the divine pedagogy, which tests the Christian's faith; the more deep and vigorous that faith is the more He tries it, so that it may become even more deeply-rooted. These tests should not be looked upon as sanctions, or signs of God's displeasure, but as a stimulant to a triumphant perseverance. That is why faith is never definitely at rest; it has to fight, and it seems that, as at Cana, it even fights with God Himself, or with Christ, Who appears to repulse the prayer, but only in order to make it more urgent and to answer it with more liberality. The measure of the answer—all the waterpots full to the brim—is that of faith. Mary's soul reached to the limit of trust. And if Jesus inflicted on His mother the test of an abrupt answer, which astonishes us, is it not a consolation and an encouragement for our tests of faith?

MARY, MODEL OF VICTORIOUS FAITH

Another sort of test, longer and more painful, attacked Mary's faith. In her family, this faith met with resistance, for Jesus' cousins refused to believe in Him and even wanted to stop Him from preaching and make Him go back to the peaceful life of Nazareth (Mark 3:21). One can imagine how Mary suffered from this opposition and how much the reproach of madness on the part of his cousins wounded her mother's heart. And when she heard these same cousins inviting her Son to perform miracles so that honor and profit should redound to the family, did she not feel a move-

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ment of indignation? (John 7:3) Her faith in Jesus' messianic vocation found itself constantly in the presence of this scornful incredulity. Our Lady was the first to experience that suffering which so many converts have met with after her, to have to live with a faith in Christ which they hold as their most precious possession, in the midst of people to whom they are linked by family affection, but who remain unbelieving. In this difficulty of communal life and divergent faith, she shows the road to follow. She made the effort to keep the friendship of all her relations and at the same time with delicacy and firmness, she kept her faith complete. Finally, it is she who brought her family into this unique faith and who by the persuasive gentleness of her example led the cousins to Christ as His disciples. At Pentecost, we know that they were in the Cenacle with Mary and the apostles to receive the Holy Spirit. True faith communicates itself by osmosis, and at the price of sacrifices of love and regard for unbelievers, it is capable of breaking down the most violent resistance.

The supreme trial of Mary's faith was on Calvary. It is not necessary to dwell on it at length. It is enough to contemplate Our Lady standing at the foot of the cross to see how this faith, battered by the tempest, is erect with unbreakable strength. In the midst of desertions and panic, she remains faithful. All the trust which Mary had put in the Child of Nazareth, then in the Preacher of the public life, she now placed with a strengthened energy in the Crucified. Pierced by the sword of dolors, her heart still believed, more ardently than ever. In her tortured Son, she recognized the saviour of humanity. "Truly, this man was the son of God." (Mark 15:39). If the centurion could pronounce that sentence, with what intense conviction must not Our Lady have thought it! So, in order to get the most vivid picture of Mary's faith, we must meet the gaze which she fixed on the cross. We shall understand then that in the Christian life, faith takes on its fullness and vitality when it is attached to Christ crucified. In sorrow, the Christian's faith rises up as from a magnificent spring, if it strives to join itself to Mary's gaze, irresistibly clinging to its dying Lord as to the source of salvation. It is this gaze of faith which is infallibly transformed into the vision of the glorified Christ.

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